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RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0515  
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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4241  
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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN/SCO: PRIORITIES AND OUTLOOK

Classified By: Poloff Steven Prohaska for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), including representatives from MFA's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Section, have indicated recently that Uzbekistan prioritizes security and economic cooperation within the organization but is strongly opposed to Iranian membership in the SCO and would oppose any "anti-Western" initiatives. The SCO has formed a "Contact Group" on Afghanistan. While factors such as the potential to derive security and economic benefits from the organization, the chance to coordinate with, monitor, and balance relations with neighbors and countries active in the region, and opportunities for prestige probably all drive Uzbekistan's participation in the organization, Uzbekistan clearly disagrees with some of the initiatives other member states have posed. Moreover, official commentary from the Government of Uzbekistan reflects concern that its opinions be taken seriously in the organization, and that decisions be made based on consensus. Uzbekistan appears to be poised to devote greater attention and resources to the SCO within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. End summary.

MFA Officials Praise SCO, Outline Projects and Priorities  
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¶2. (C) On May 27, Poloff met with Second Secretary Muhammad Rashidov and Third Secretary Nuraliy Irzaev of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Section to discuss Uzbekistan's views of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Rashidov, who did most of the talking, praised the SCO as a dynamic organization and a platform for constructive dialogue, and said that Uzbekistan is generally satisfied with it. The SCO is not a closed

organization, and it is open to dialogue with the international community. Its activities are not directed against any states. Rashidov noted in particular that the SCO is not anti-Western. (Note: In a later meeting with U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford, Foreign Minister Norov quoted President Karimov as saying that the SCO is not pursuing an anti-Western agenda, and Uzbekistan would be completely opposed to any such plans. End note.) He explained that the SCO is involved in a variety of security, political, economic, and humanitarian areas, and is working to combat terrorism, extremism, separatism, crime, narcotics, and weapons trafficking.

¶3. (C) Rashidov briefly described the SCO's role in promoting security, citing the Tashkent-based Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) as playing a special role in combating threats. He said that the RATS closely cooperates with law enforcement bodies, and that its tasks include developing a single list of terrorist groups, maintaining a database of persons involved in terrorism, and identifying criminal organizations involved in narcotrafficking.

¶4. (C) He appeared more enthusiastic about the economic dimension of the organization, and said that Uzbekistan is particularly interested in its potential to create more jobs for Uzbekistan's populace, stimulate investment cooperation, solve (unspecified) social issues, and develop transportation. Irzaev said that the SCO is pursuing more than 120 projects, and has created 15 special working groups to pursue particular issues including e-commerce, the development of transit potential, and health. They also noted that the Ministries of Culture and the Ministries of Emergency Situations in each SCO member state interact with one another on certain projects. Rashidov said that overall, Uzbekistan "positively assesses" the SCO, and supports the development of the organization and strengthening its role in the region and the world.

#### Views of Energy Club, SCO Role in Water Usage

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¶5. (C) In response to a question on Uzbekistan's view of the idea of establishing an SCO Energy Club, Rashidov called the initiative "interesting." (Note: The SCO Energy Club is a Russian-proposed initiative which could be used to regulate Central Asian energy exports. End note.) The SCO members are considering the proposal, but a decision has not yet been made. He also said that the SCO is working on environmental protection and rational water usage issues.

#### SCO "Contact Group" on Afghanistan

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¶6. (C) Rashidov said that the SCO has established a "Contact Group" to deal with Afghanistan issues. The SCO and Afghanistan signed a protocol establishing this on November 4, 2005 in Beijing. The group's permanent members include all member-states of the SCO and senior Afghan diplomats from Afghanistan's Embassy in China. The main objective of the Contact Group, Rashidov explained, is to coordinate efforts to combat terrorism, extremism, separatism, and trafficking, and to facilitate coordination between the SCO and Afghanistan. At the first meeting of the group on February 17, 2006, the group mainly discussed procedural issues. The next meeting of the group on February 13, 2007 addressed cooperation in combating narcotrafficking and developing Afghanistan's economy. Rashidov said that Afghanistan was interested in receiving SCO assistance in transportation and infrastructure development, as well as agriculture aid.

¶7. (C) Rashidov said that there would not be any SCO-sponsored conference on Afghanistan in the near future, but that the issue was under consideration. He again stressed that there should be consensus in the organization before any such conference takes place.

#### Reticent on Discussing SCO's Budget

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¶8. (C) Rashidov said that every member of the SCO contributes resources to SCO activities. Rashidov and Irzaev felt that even taking inflation into account, the SCO's budget has been rising in recent years, but they would not reveal the current budget of the organization.

#### Opposed to Iranian Membership in the SCO

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¶9. (C) In response to a question on Uzbekistan's views of adding Iran as a member-state of the SCO, Rashidov said that there is no legal basis for adding additional members, and that potential Iranian membership is not on the agenda. A few days later, Foreign Minister Norov told Ambassador Hanford that President Karimov is opposed to even considering the addition of Iran to the SCO. Norov reiterated Uzbekistan's opposition to Iranian membership in the SCO on June 2 in a meeting with Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher, and said that Uzbekistan has called on President Rahmon to end Tajikistan's support of this.

#### What Lies Ahead?

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¶10. (C) Rashidov said that the next summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will take place in late August (in Dushanbe). He deflected Poloff's question about Uzbekistan's goals for the summit, vaguely alluding to "regional and global issues," and noting that an agenda is being drafted. Rashidov said that he would probably attend the summit.

#### Comment:

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¶11. (S/NF) Our discussions with various officials reveal that while GOU officials value cooperation within the framework of the SCO, there is still an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the organization and some disagreement with proposals from other member states. One MFA official recently told Poloff privately that China and Russia were putting pressure on Uzbekistan to sign up to a statement at the upcoming SCO summit concerning weapons in outer space, but the official wanted the SCO to avoid getting involved in such issues and instead concentrate on security and economic cooperation. Rashidov's repeated insistence that there should be consensus before certain initiatives move forward, and Norov's statement that Uzbekistan will always oppose using the SCO as a tool of the major powers also underscore Uzbekistan's concern with ensuring that its opinions are taken seriously in the organization.

¶12. (C) We suspect that Uzbekistan cooperates with the SCO for several reasons. First, Uzbekistan hopes that it can derive some tangible economic and security benefits from membership in the organization. Second, membership provides Uzbekistan with opportunities for international prestige, such as hosting the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. Third, membership in the SCO gives Uzbekistan the chance to coordinate with, monitor, and balance relations with its neighbors and key states involved in the region.

¶13. (C) Uzbek political insider Rafik Saifullin (formerly head of the government-run Institute for Regional and Strategic Studies) also provided Poloffs with insight recently on Uzbekistan's attitudes toward the SCO. According to Saifullin, SCO indeed has value as a security and economic organization. The GOU, however, is also very much concerned with balancing China and Russia and preventing either from dominating Central Asia. President Karimov, he said, and most in the GOU fear China the most--it is the 800-pound gorilla--and will invariably take Russia's side in China-Russia disputes. Saifullin explained that closer U.S.-Uzbekistan relations also allow the Uzbeks in turn to fend off Russian influence. The Uzbeks, Saifullin implied rather strongly, see in the SCO a useful mechanism for facilitating this balancing game.

¶14. (C) Rashidov's indication that Uzbekistan supports strengthening the role of the SCO in the region and the world--and President Karimov's statement on June 6 in St. Petersburg that Uzbekistan sees prospects for developing the SCO--may foreshadow greater attention to the organization in the GOU in the future. Sections in the MFA are typically subordinate to a Department. Interestingly, MFA's "SCO Section" is not part of the Department of International Organizations, but is instead directly subordinate to a Deputy Foreign Minister. This suggests possible expansion of the section, with additional personnel and resources devoted to SCO matters, in the future.

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